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ABSTRACT

Conclusions reached by the Illinois State Board of Education Study, released in May 1985, that small schools are inferior and inefficient, that Illinois has too many schools, and that over half its schools should be closed seem to be an educational step backward. Without linking the two concepts, the study implies that school consolidation will result in streamlined state aid formulation and this improved distribution of money will assure educational quality. Research data do not prove that small schools are inferior and cannot link student performance to school enrollment. Because both large and small schools have strengths and weaknesses, with neither having clear advantages, the issue of school reorganization should not be an arbitrary bureaucratic decision but should begin on the local level where choice of school size can depend on what parents value in life. The School District Report Card, required by the 1985 Educational Reform Package, will establish a uniform database that can be used for school district evaluation and formulation of statewide standards to assess performance of both large and small schools. As long as the district, regardless of size, is meeting the set criteria, it should be unlawful to reorganize that district either by direct mandate or through imposed state funding restrictions. (NEC)

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By: Scott Jones

Industry Illinois
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The history of Illinois is one of pronounced diversity. Population distribution varies from remote rural communities to vast urban centers. The economy ranges from Caterpillar Tractor Company to the family farm. Cultural differences vary dramatically from region to region, with each city, each town and each village having its own unique identity. The educational system of Illinois has evolved within this society to accommodate these wide cultural, social, economic and demographic differences.

Metropolitan areas, having large educational centers with vast course offerings and with a wide array of extra curricular activities, offer excellent educational opportunities, but these large centers are noticeably deficient in nurturing the development of the individual. Limited participation in extra-curricular activities, lack of teacher-student contact and the absence of a feeling of "belonging"--all of these retard character development. Children tend to become numbers instead of individuals.

In contrast, rural areas, having small schools with basic educational offerings and limited extra-curricular activities, provide a solid educational opportunity in addition to promoting the development of a student's identity. Unlimited extra-curricular participation, unobstructed pupil-teacher contact, and a true sense of belonging all enhance the self-image of any student. Children do not become numbers, for they are active participants in an intimate, personal, educational experience. In short, schools become products of the existing environment.

After eighty years of school district evolution, the State Board of

Education, in a study released in May, 1985, concluded that Illinois has too many schools and that over half of these should be closed. Schools can no longer afford, both educationally and financially, to reflect the uniqueness and individual characteristics of their communities. The State Board contends that small schools are not only inferior but also inefficient. The Board, stating that to reach an optimal learning environment (critical mass theory in education), believes the high school should have an enrollment range of 500 to 1250 (grades nine through twelve) or a combined unit district enrollment (kindergarten through grade twelve) of 1500 children. The study asserts that educational opportunities are improved when critical mass is attained and that any variation (larger or smaller) from this optimum range significantly impedes student performance. Small schools lack adequate curricula and require too many teacher preparations. However, there is no explanation given for student deficiencies in large schools.

Another dominant theme throughout the report and one given as an important impetus for school consolidation is streamlining state aid formulation. Improved distribution of money is supposed to assure educational quality; yet, again, the linkage between the two is blatantly lacking.

What are the facts about school size and student performance? The State Board's report, along with numerous other studies, shows conclusively that large schools are educationally inferior. Yet there is no discussion of these deficiencies or of remedies for them—that is down sizing large schools to achieve optimal enrollment. Evidently bigger is better regardless of the facts when political ends are served, even in the education of our children. Obviously both urban and rural students are not important in Illinois. The state proposes to maintain, by omission, inferior education for students in urban areas while destroying, by design, a highly successful system of

instruction in rural areas. This indeed is, in my opinion, an educational step backward. What do you think?

The report also claims that student performance is influenced significantly by two factors which are referred to as student and school factors. Student factors mentioned are motivation, parental influence, values, educational exposure/opportunities and expectations/standards; these factors influence student achievement by as much as thirty-three percent, with expectations/standards being the most important. School factors such as course offerings, geographic location, community type, social-economic status and school size are said to contribute as much as twenty percent toward student performance, with school size being the major factor. While school size is only one of four school factors, which are of secondary importance in comparison to student factors, the significance assigned to it by the State Board is highly questionable. Can school reorganization significantly influence student performance when it contributes less than twenty percent toward educational achievement? The question must be asked: Is educational quality really enhanced through school consolidation?

The assertion that the performance of students from small schools is inferior becomes highly questionable at best with an objective assessment of the facts. With a combined data base of ninety-three years, Dr. A. N. Hieronymous and Dr. Robert Forsyth, both members of the faculty at the University of Iowa, have not been able to find any evidence of inferior education in the small school setting. Dr. Ted Sanders, the Illinois Superintendent of Schools, admitted publicly that no other study can be found to support this critical mass theory. Numerous doctoral dissertations, along with positions assumed by the states of New York, Montana, California and

Nebraska, conclude that support for an optimum enrollment requirement in primary and secondary schools does not exist. Even the state of Pennsylvania, which the Illinois report cited as an example of improved education through consolidation, cannot find any data to prove that small schools are inferior. Student performance has not and cannot be linked to school enrollment.

Considering the topic of teacher preparations, there is no question that teachers in small schools do have more preparations, averaging over three per day. But which is educationally more beneficial, four preparations and fifty papers or two preparations with one-hundred fifty papers? If the instructor is to adequately evaluate the performance of the student, would not fifty papers be easier to grade than one-hundred fifty? Thus the teacher with fewer papers is able to spend more time evaluating each student, time which eventually means better education for those involved. One interesting benefit of increased teacher attention is that the average student benefits the most, allowing him to better realize his potential. Becoming a number and being lost in "the shuffle" is a distinct disadvantage of the large school. Such a situation is not found in the small school setting. The loser becomes the average student, and this is called "economies of size"!

Curriculum is an area which demands constant attention because it is basic to any educational process. As technology opens new vistas for man, so should the school curriculum hold open the door of opportunity for our children. But how important are exotic courses when there are students who are functionally illiterate? A large menu does not necessarily insure a quality meal any more than a large curriculum guarantees quality education. Even President Ronald Reagan's Commission on Education stressed a "back to basics" approach in curriculum development. Improvement of course offerings should be a priority, but closing schools and bussing children to the course is hardly an innovation

or an improvement. Creative education policy should find ways of working with and improving the existing system.

Although extra-curricular activities are, and rightly so, of secondary importance, there is no doubt that they do add to the character-building process found in modern education. Again, small schools lack the depth of activities, but they do offer the opportunity to participate for those who are of average ability. In a small school students who are not gifted in theater can be in the class play; in a large school, auditions are limited to those gifted in acting. Likewise in sports: average athletes are given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of participating in interscholastic athletics in the small school; but, again, they are denied the chance of participation in large schools. If school consolidation occurs as Dr. Sanders desires, there will be five thousand fewer basketball players, eight thousand fewer baseball players, eleven thousand fewer thespians, eleven thousand fewer musicians, and the list goes on and on. Are the interests of our rural and small town children best served with school consolidation?

Another problem unaddressed in the report is the dropout rate of our high school students. Twenty-five percent of students in the state do not receive a high school diploma, according to the statistical average. Yet less than five percent drop out of small schools. How do we explain to the twenty percent of students who will not finish their education, because of consolidation, that this is educational reform? Is this improved educational opportunity? Not to me; is it to you?

Finally, should school funding simplification be justification for changing the school district makeup of our state? Is the elimination of fifty-five percent of our school districts a reasonable trade-off in order to make life

easier in Springfield? Our community disagrees. What is the opinion of your community? Yet Ted Sanders and the State Board of Education persist in their quest of closing our schools. It is easy to look at reams of test scores, statistics, and just one study to justify massive consolidation. To me this information only removes the human element from the issue. Consolidation is a human issue, and the State Board cannot ignore this fact.

Student stress, resulting from the following causes, will likely increase the dropout rate and promote alienation towards the educational process. When a student who "belonged" in a small school is thrust into the environment of numbers in a large school, the impact could be devastating. The negative effects of prolonged bussing, which are well documented, would be physically limiting to quality education. How long does it take the new school to assimilate those coming from the other town or towns? Incoming student segregation by the existing student body is a definite risk, but this issue again was not addressed by the Illinois report. Losing the open door policy for access to teachers, administrators, etc. could also adversely affect the new student. In short, the incoming student would have to make dramatic adjustments just to survive, let alone excel in the new school.

What about the community that loses its school? Granted, education is the primary concern of the local school, but to totally ignore the impact on the surrounding area is short-sighted at best. What about the responsibility of the state to those left behind? In removing the school from a community, the economic, social, and cultural ramifications would be devastating. The school is usually the largest employer, the largest depositor in the local bank, a source of trade for local businesses and the social-cultural center for the community. Population retention, economic development both present and future, maintenance of the tax base and continuation of public services are all

essential in any community; yet they too would be jeopardized with the loss of the local school. Now, what about the loss of those intangible benefits associated with the professionals who are members of the staff at the school? Summer leagues would lose organizational help; cultural events such as plays and concerts would no longer take place; local governments and service clubs would lose valuable members. Simply stated, the community would eventually cease to function. What happens in the city when a neighborhood school is closed? Usually the area experiences both social and cultural decline, losing its identity in the process, until the quality of life is destroyed. Likewise, the quality of life in a rural community, without its school, would decline as well. This would have negative effects state-wide with the loss of jobs, population shifts, and decline of our rural social base. Illinois would have some large adjustments to make in a very short time. Is school consolidation worth the risk?

How can Illinois be spared this unnecessary turmoil and refocus its attention on quality education? First and foremost, quality education has to be the top priority in our state to insure our continuing leadership in cultural, social, economic and educational affairs of the nation. In the Educational Reform Package of 1985, the Legislature furnished a way to achieve these ends. A School District Report Card is required by all districts in the state. Such a card, to be published yearly, will provide specific, technical information for examination and evaluation by parents, the Illinois State Board of Education and the State Legislature. This information will establish a uniform base of data that can be used for school district evaluation. A set of state-wide standards should be established to assess performance of both large and small schools, in order that objective decisions be made in program

evaluation. With quality being the basis, all programs regardless of size should have to meet these standards in order to retain accreditation. If deficiencies are found, then recommendations can be made to improve the program in question, with consolidation or down sizing as a remedy of last resort. As long as the district, regardless of size, is meeting the set criteria, it should be unlawful to reorganize that district either by direct mandate or through imposed state funding restrictions.

The diversity of Illinois is surpassed only by the quality of life experienced by those who live within its boundaries. Our diversity and quality of life are two key reasons for the history of success associated with Illinois; there is found a common denominator in both, this denominator being our schools. The schools have a unique relationship with this diversity--quality of life scheme which is one of interdependence and mutual influence. The schools are the products of our diversity and yet contribute significantly to sustaining this great variation. A prime reason for the quality of life found in Illinois is the influence of the local school, while in turn the community shapes and influences the educational environment found in that school. The schools and the state are dependent on each other for survival, and to contribute to the demise of one would be to insure the destruction of the other.

Opposition is not being expressed toward all school consolidation per se but toward arbitrary consolidation and the critical mass theory found in education. As a child's education begins at home in the pre-school years, so should the issue of school reorganization begin at home on the local level. This local level is the place where school reorganization is of paramount importance and where it is best understood. The local school is an integral part of its community; thus its future should be determined by those who depend

on it to the greatest extent--the local citizenry. An infringement on the right of community control over any local taxing body is contrary to our basic beliefs as citizens of Illinois and of the United States. Local control is as basic as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Local, state and national interests are best served by a well-educated populace, and no one is more aware of this fact than those who live in rural Illinois. But the awareness does not stop there, for it continues in the form of demanding quality education for all. When these ends are not met, the concerned community is the first to know and the first to act. Local control for our schools is essential, for it is our right.

As Illinois cannot survive without its cities, towns and villages, they in turn cannot survive without their schools. Once this unique system of schools is dismantled, such a system can never be rebuilt. We realize that choosing to send children to small rural schools involves educational trade-offs, but so does sending children to a large school. Both types of schools have their strengths and weaknesses, with neither having a clear advantage; therefore our choice of school size depends on what we as parents value in life. And so we return to the diversity spoken of earlier--cultural, social, economic and demographic--with each individual to his own choice. Take a school from an urban neighborhood and you insure urban decay. Take the school from a rural community and you guarantee its death.

My plea to you is:

PLEASE SAVE RURAL ILLINOIS

PLEASE SAVE OUR SCHOOLS